Time, History and Politics in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral.*

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In this essay I wish to make two suggestions concerning Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, his famous dramatisation of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket written for the Canterbury Festival of 1935[1]. The first of these is that this play is a fundamentally political play, and that as such it should be read in the context of Eliot's other political writings of the period. The second is that the conception of politics expressed in the play, although avowedly Christian, is nevertheless decisively influenced by Eliot's reading of the classical Hindu scripture known as the *Bhagavad Gita*. While neither of these suggestions, considered independently, is entirely new[2], to the best of my knowledge neither of them has been treated in any depth and, more importantly, their deep interconnection has not been perceived. The result of this, I believe, is that Eliot's own political stance has frequently been either over-simplified or misunderstood.

When I claim here that the play is a political play, I have in mind two rather different senses in which it may be said to be political. The first is that the play is quite simply written out of a definite, if perhaps

(1) T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, London, 1968. All references are to page numbers in this edition.

(2) For a political discussion of the play see: William M. Chace, The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, Stanford, California, 1973, pp. 172-3. (I would not recommend this book.) For the influence of the *Bhagavad Gita* see: Philip R. Headings, T. S. Eliot, New Haven, Conn., 1964, pp. 135-136, and also: David Ward, T. S. Eliot: Between Two Worlds, London, 1973, p. 261.

misguided, historical analysis of the political situation in which Eliot found himself - in this sense, I believe, the play can be regarded as a political intervention, an attempt to persuade the audience to adopt a definite attitude to the contemporary world. The second sense in which the play is political is a little different, which is that the play is itself fundamentally about the nature and possibility of a Christian politics. To read the play in the context of Eliot's other political writings[3], is not so much to use these writings as a key to the meaning of the play as to suggest that Eliot's understanding of politics cannot be grasped fully without a clear understanding of *Murder in the Cathedral.* In particular the play allows us to see the importance of Eliot's simultaneous opposition to both liberalism and totalitarianism, and the key role which the idea of the saint played in his thought.

These suggestions are neatly supported by Eliot's later, and superficially somewhat surprising remark that he wrote the play as 'anti-Nazi propaganda'[4]. On the face of it, of course, there seems little connection between the story of a twelfth-century martyr and the rise of the Nazis; moreover, to many modern writers, Eliot's attitude to Nazism has seemed oddly neutral[5]. Eliot also remarked to the director of the film of the play that the scene in which the Knights, having murdered Thomas, step forward to address the audience directly 'was his main reason for writing the play'[6]. Again many critics have felt that this scene constitutes a

(3) Here I have in mind in particular the very useful collection of writings published as: T. S. Eliot, The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings, London, 2nd Edition, 1982. (Hereafter: I. C. S.)

(4) See Carol H. Smith, T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice, (196ℰ), Reprint: New York 1977, p. 24.

(5) This issue is well-discussed in: A. D. Moody' Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet, Cambridge, 1977, pp. 319-326; see esp. p. 323.

(6) See George Hoellering, 'Filming Murder in the Cathedral', in: Neville Braybrooke (ed.), T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for His Seventieth Birthday (1958), Reprint: London, 1970, p. 83.

distraction from the main theme of the drama [7], and Eliot himself described it as 'a kind of trick' derived from Shaw's *St. Joan* [8]. Yet this trick, whereby the Knights address the audience in contemporary English idiom, had, as Eliot tells us, a clear artistic purpose: 'to shock the audience out of their complacency' [9]. The importance of this purpose to the play as a whole can be seen in the connection between the words of the Fourth Knight and the title of the play: 'What I have to say may be put in the form of a question: *Who killed the Archbishop?*' (p. 89) [10]. Eliot apparently thought at one point of calling the play *The Archbishop Murder Case* [11]; even with the present title, however, the connection between the play and a detective story is apparent. Eliot wishes, in fact, to re-establish both a sense of mystery to Thomas' murder and an awareness of guilt; in one scene the Fourth Tempter tells Thomas, as part of a sketch of the futility of his actions, that:

> ...later is worse, when men will not hate you
> Enough to defame or execrate you,
> But pondering over the qualities that you lacked
> Will only try to find the historical fact.
> When men shall declare there was no mystery
> About this man who played a certain part in history. (p. 40)

Clearly Eliot himseif suspected his sudience of having this attitude towards the subject of his drama; his own aim, however, was neither to present

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(7) See e. g. Hugh Kenner, The Invisible Poet, New York, 1959, p. 253, for an influential criticism of the device. It is interesting to note that Grover Smith, T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays, Chicago, 2nd Edition, 1974, misrepresents this comment as Hoellering's own observation (p. 181).

(8) See T. S. Eliot, Poetry and Drama, reprinted in F. Kermode (ed.), Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot, London, 1975, p. 141.

(9) Ibid., p. 140.

(10) See note 1 above.

(11) See Grover Smith, op. cit., p. 181.

an historical entertainment 'about some remote historical period, far enough away from the present for the characters not to need to be recognisable as human beings'[12], nor to give a dispassionate historical analysis of Thomas' character and motives. Rather he wanted 'to bring home to the audience the contemporary relevance of the situation'[13].

It is this 'contemporary relevance' which in Eliot's mind had an unmistakably political dimension. This emerges clearly enough in the speeches of the Knights themselves, where the linguistic anachronism goes well beyond the 'neutrality' to which Eliot normally aspired in his dramatic verse[14] and becomes a positive parody of the political language and attitudes of the period:

> When you come to the point, it does go against the grain to kill an Archbishop, especially when you have been brought up in good Church traditions. So if we seemed a bit rowdy, you will understand why it was; and for my part I am awfully sorry about it. (p. 85)

Part of the purpose of this is simply to suggest the woeful inadequacy of contemporary English attitudes towards the Church; more importantly, however, it has the function of identifying the murderers with the ordinary middle-class members of the play's original audience. The viewpoint of the Knights, in fact, is not one of hatred or contempt for Thomas (as it is when they first attack him), but rather one of a vague, and perhaps typically British, regret for such unpleasantness. In other words the Knights offer the audience a primarily political justification for the murder:

> Unhappily, there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice can be secured. At another time, you would condemn an Archbishop

(12) Kermode (ed.), op. cit., p. 138.
(13) Ibid., p. 139.
(14) Ibid., p. 139.

> by vote of Parliament and execute him formally as a traitor, and no one would have to bear the burden of being called murderer. And at a later time still, even such temperate measures as these would become unnecessary. But, if you have arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State, remember that it is we who took the first step. We have been instrumental in bringing about the state of affairs that you approve. We have served your interests; we merit your applause; and if there is any guilt whatever in the matter, you must share it with us. (p. 88)

Here we see both Eliot's own alienation from the pretensions of a liberal democracy - an Act of Parliament is simply murder by another name - and his strong drive to polarise the issues. In effect he insists that the audience choose between supporting the present subordination of the Church to the State, and thus indirectly supporting Thomas' bloody murderers who stand before them on the stage, or reject the murderers and thus reject the present political system and its liberal pretensions. Eliot uses the murder of Thomas as a test case for what is often called the 'Whig interpretation of history' - that understanding of English history, popular in the Victorian period, which saw in it the inevitable progress and triumph of liberal institutions(15). (It is worth noting here that Winston Churchill himself regarded Becket's opponent, Henry II, as the founder of English law(16)). Eliot's own hostility to the society which had been created, in part, through Thomas' death, emerges clearly enough when Thomas, earlier in the play, addresses the audience directly:

> But for every evil, every sacrilege,
> Crime, wrong, oppression and the axe's edge,

(15) This phrase in fact derives from Herbert Butterfield's famous study of that title.

(16) See W. Churchill, A History of the English-Speaking Peoples, London, 1956, Vol. 1, p. 175.

> Indifference, exploitation, you, and you,
> And you, must all be punished. So must you. (p. 48)

Eliot's challenge to any 'Whig' complacency on the part of his audience in *Murder in the Cathedral*, can be seen as much more urgently political when it is placed in the context of his more general views on the nature of society during the nineteen-thirties, the period of what one critic has called his 'militant Christianity'[17]. Eliot's concrete political views may be seen, in fact, as a variant of that tradition of conservative agrarianism and anti-industrialism which can be traced back to the great Victorian critics of industrialisation, and in particular Carlyle, Ruskin and Dickens[18], another variant of which we find in the writings of F. R. Leavis and his followers[19]. In 1938 Eliot wrote in the *Criterion*:

> To understand thoroughly what is wrong with agriculture is to understand what is wrong with nearly everything else: with the domination of Finance, with the ideas and system of Education, indeed our whole philosophy of life... What is fundamentally wrong is the urbanisation of mind... It is necessary that the greater part of the population of all classes (so long as we have classes) should be settled in the country and dependent upon it. One sees no hope either in the Labour Party or in the equally unimaginative dominant section of the Conservative Party. There seems no hope in contemporary politics at all.[20]

The overtones of right-wing radicalism are clear enough in this passage, but to understand precisely what Eliot means here by the 'urbanisation of mind' it is perhaps best to look at the critique of liberalism which he

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(17) Carol H. Smith, op. cit., Chapter One: The Pursuit of Order.
(18) See esp. Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, London, 1958, for a study of this tradition.
(19) Eliot comments approvingly on the Leavisites in I. C. S., p. 152. For Leavis' views see: Francis Mulhern, The Moment of Scrutiny, London, 1979.
(20) Quoted in 'Introduction', I. C. S., p. 12.

offered in his *The Idea of a Christian Society*:

> By destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness rather than wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified, by fostering a notion of 'getting on' to which the alternative is a hopeless apathy, Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanized or brutalized control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos.(21)

This extreme vision of a chaotic and atomistic dystopia is clearly connected to Eliot's personal experience of modern urban life, as registered in *The Wasteland* and elsewhere; closely connected with it, however, is his overtly political attitude towards capitalism:

> ...such problems as the hypertrophy of Profit into a social ideal, the distinction between the *use* of natural resources and their exploitation, the advantages unfairly accruing to the trader in contrast to the primary producer, the misdirection of the financial machine, the iniquity of usury, and other features of a commercialised society.(22)

This critique of liberalism and capitalism on Eliot's part has caused some critics to see him as a sympathiser with Fascism(23); indeed Eliot's occasional anti-Semitism(24), his interest in the Social Credit movement(25), and his general hostility to 'usury' do have something in common with, for example, Ezra Pound's Fascism. Yet any such view of Eliot must rest itself on a very partial reading of his writings, for, as his critique of liberalism suggests, what gives urgency and point to his criticisms of

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(21) Ibid., pp. 48-49.
(22) Ibib., p. 61; c. f. p. 80.
(23) See Chace, op. cit., passim.
(24) See Moody, op. cit., p. 354, Note 18.
(25) See I. C. S., p. 13.

society is precisely the rise of totalitarianism, whether of the left or the right. In Eliot's analysis, such totalitarianism, far from being the solution to society's ills, was itself the inevitable outcome of modernisation. Eliot seems to have been clear from very early on that, in his words, 'both Fascism and Communism have fundamental ideas which are incompatible with Christianity'[26], and his hostility to them seems to have been both consistent and unambiguous[27]. In his view totalitarianism was simply the consequence of liberalism; sociologically, because liberalism dissolved the traditional bonds which had united people in close agricultural communities; and spiritually, because the liberal state could never satisfy men's need for a total way of life: 'what we are seeking is not a programme for a party but a way of life for a people: it is this which totalitarianism has sought partly to revive, and partly to impose by force upon its peoples'[28], and again, elsewhere: 'one of the causes of the totalitarian State is an effort of the State to supply a function which the Church has ceased to serve'[29]. This political analysis appears also within *Murder in the Cathedral* itself:

> Those who put their faith in wordly order
> Not controlled by the order of God,
> In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder,
> Make it fast, breed fatal disease,
> Degrade what they exalt. (p. 31)

Thus for Eliot what totalitarianism and liberalism share is, for the Christian, of far greater importance than what divides them - and this is the basis for Eliot's refusal to join in with liberal denunciations of Fascism:

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(26) Ibid., p. 102.
(27) Ibid., p. 15; Moody, op. cit., p. 353.
(28) I. C. S., p. 51.
(29) Ibid., p. 94.

> ...the difference between the Idea of a Neutral Society (which is that of the society we live in at present) and the Idea of a Pagan Society (such as the upholders of democracy abominate) is, in the long run, of minor importance.(30)

Yet the effect of the rise of totalitarianism in the period on Eliot, as on some of his contemporaries, is precisely to politicise him, to convince him that a choice between Christian and Pagan politics had become urgent. We find this view expressed as early as his essay *Thoughts After Lambeth*, written in 1931:

> This advance is of no small importance in a world which will obviously divide itself more and more sharply into Christians and non-Christians. ... The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilised but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilisation, and save the World from Suicide.(31)

This already somewhat apocalyptic view of the future of the modern world has become considerably more urgent by 1939:

> It is my contention that we have today a culture which is mainly negative, but which, so far as it is positive, is still Christian. I do not think it can remain negative, because a negative culture has ceased to be efficient in a world where economic as well as spiritual forces are proving the efficiency of cultures which, even when pagan, are positive; and I believe that the choice before us is between the formation of a new Christian culture, and the acceptance of a pagan one.(32)

The very success of totalitarianism leads Eliot to the conclusion that we

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(30) Ibid., p. 44.
(31) See: T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays, London, 3rd Edition, 1951, p. 387. (Hereafter: S. E.)
(32) I. C. S., p. 47.

must strive to create a positive Christian society. In the context of this pressing choice it is hardly surprising to find Eliot moving from a critical position in which religious literature could be enjoyed irrespective of its precise philosophical content - an essentially liberal one - to the belief that, as he wrote in the same year as *Murder in the Cathedral*, 'Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint. In ages like our own, in which there is no such common agreement, it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, with explicit ethical and theological standards'(33). This tendency to subordinate all his literary activities to an explicitly Christian standpoint perhaps reached its climax in the year before this essay, with the series of lectures published as *After Strange Gods* (1934), in which he branded various contemporary writers, including Pound and Lawrence, as 'heretical'(34).

If we place the play, then, in this intellectual context, where Eliot could write that "however bigoted the announcement may sound, the Christian can be satisfied with nothing less than a Christian organisation of society'(35), then we can see why he should have regarded the Knights' speeches as the point of the play, and seen the play itself as 'anti-Nazi propaganda'. By presenting the story of Thomas in such a way that the audience is forced to choose - between Thomas and his murderers, Christianity and secularism - Eliot was actively seeking to spread his own sense of the dire condition of liberalism to a wider audience.

But if *Murder in the Cathedral* seeems to be in this relatively stra-

(33) Kermode (ed.), op. cit., p. 97. For Eliot's earlier view see S. E., esp. pp. 116 117. For a good discussion of the whole question see: Allen Austin, T. S. Eliot: The Literary and the Social Criticism, London, 1971, Chapter III.
(34) T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods, London, 1934.
(35) I. C. S., p. 62.

ightforward way a political drama, it must also be recognised that the play is in another sense profoundly anti-political. This anti-political strain chiefly takes the form of a pronounced fatalism; in terms of the title to my essay, we may say that the play presents at once a deeply political view of history and a deeply anti-political view of time. This sense of the futility of politics is, in fact, introduced in the very first speech of the play:

> Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen
> Who do, some well, some ill, planning and guessing,
> Having their aims which turn in their hands in the pattern of time.
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> (p. 13)

This theme, of a pattern of events which both transcends time, and is revealed in time, is, of course, a major theme of both this play and the *Four Quartets*. But the notion itself seems quite hostile to any political action in the world; later Thomas expands upon this theme:

> You argue by results, as this world does,
> To settle if an act be good or bad.
> You defer to the fact. For every life and every act
> Consequence of good and evil can be shown.
> And as in time results of many deeds are blended
> So good and evil in the end become confounded. (p. 79)

Clearly if we can never know what the consequences of our actions will be, political activity must be rendered completely pointless. This same scepticism is expressed by the Third Priest:

> For ill or good, let the wheel turn.
> For who knows the end of good or evil? (p. 18)

and Thomas in another passage tells us that:

> We do not know very much of the future
> Except that from generation to generation
> The same things happen again and again.
> Men learn little from other's experience.
> But in the life of one man, never
> The same time returns. Sever
> The cord, shed the scale. Only
> The fool, fixed in his folly, may think
> He can turn the wheel on which he turns. (p. 25)

In both passages time is envisaged as a wheel, a continual repetition of the same events, upon which the individual man helplessly turns. The notion that we can significantly affect the world or the course of time is declared to be an illusion. These fatalistic themes are summed up by Thomas in his sermon:

> A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. (p. 53)

Politics and saintliness seem to be presented as activities directly opposed in nature, between which no compromise is possible. This impression is intensified by the presentation of political struggle as nothing more than a debased battle for power; as the Third Priest remarks early in the play:

> I see nothing quite conclusive in the art of temporal government
> But violence, duplicity and frequent malversation.
> King rules or Barons rule:
> The strong man strongly and weak man by caprice.
> They have but one law, to sieze the power and keep it,
> And the steadfast can manipulate the greed and lust of others,
> The feeble is devoured by his own. (p. 14)

The play thus seems to express two divergent and opposed attitudes towards

politics; on the one hand, the audience seems to be urged to take Thomas' side and to reject the liberal state, the establishment of which involved his murder; on the other hand, it is urged to see politics as a futile and debased activity, and encouraged to take a fatalistic view of time.

This doubleness of attitude might be seen in fact as simply a particular instance of the general contradiction between Eliot's pessimism about time, reflected everywhere in his poetry of the period, and his political activism[36]. Yet this same doubleness of attitude can actually be observed in the political writings themselves. In one passage Eliot remarks:

> We are accustomed to make the distinction (though in practice we are frequently confused) between the evil which is present in human nature at all times and in all circumstances, and the evil in particular institutions at particular times and places...[37]

This somewhat convoluted distinction is of fundamental importance for understanding Eliot's whole political outlook; in particular, it reappears when Eliot comes to treat of the proper relationship between the Church and the State:

> That there is an antithesis between the Church and the World is a belief that we derive from the highest authority. We know also from our reading of history, that a certain tension between Church and State is desirable. When Church and State fall out completely, it is ill with the commonwealth; and when Church and State get on too well together, there is something wrong with the Church.[38]

Clearly from the point of view of the eternal evil within man, which can never finally be remedied, the Church itself must always to some degree

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(36) See Chace, op. cit., p. 175.
(37) I. C. S., p. 60.
(38) Ibid., p. 100.

be in conflict with the World; yet from the point of view of particular and remediable evils, the Church must retain some influence over the world of practical affairs. Here, I think, we can appreciate Eliot's simultaneous opposition to liberalism and totalitarianism in another light; for it is clear that if in liberalism the State completely severs its connection with the Church, then in totalitarianism Church and State become completely identified. In this connection Eliot's attack on Moral Rearmament, a movement he might be supposed to have supported, is highly significant-for he sees Moral Rearmament as leading to the 'Germanisation' of Britain(39). In another place he attacks the state of mind of the 'revolutionist' who 'conceives the evils of the world as something external to himself'. For such a person 'if there is evil *incarnate*, it is always incarnate in the *other people* - a class, a race, the politicians, the bankers, the armament makers, and so forth - never in oneself'(40). It is difficult not to feel that Eliot here has in mind those very Fascists with whom he is sometimes linked; in a striking passage he tells us:

> But for most people, to be able to simplify issues so as to see only the definite external enemy, is extremely exhilarating, and brings about the bright eye and the springy step that go so well with the political uniform.(41)

Indeed one can only wish that Eliot had said this sort of thing a little louder and more often than he did.

This hostility to any attempt to identify Church and State must be linked to the profoundly anti-Utopian cast of Eliot's political thought - an anti-Utopianism which seemed to some of his Christian readers, at least, to be defeatist and pessimistic(42). Eliot himself commented:

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(39) Ibid., p. 94.
(40) Ibid., pp. 103-104.
(41) Ibid., p. 103.
(42) See Maurice Reckitt's review reprinted in I. C. S., pp. 107-111.

> It is very easy for speculation on a possible Christian order in the future to tend to come to a rest in a kind of apocalyptic vision of a golden age of virtue. But we have to remember that the kingdom of Christ on earth will never be realised, and also that it is always being realised; we must remember that whatever reform or revolution we carry out, the result will always be a sordid travesty of what human society should be - though the World is never left wholly without glory... it would require constant reform.(43)

It is surely this anti-Utopianism, this fundamental belief in the reality of original sin, which, more than anything else, ensured that Eliot's conservative anti-capitalism never moved over into any more radical political activity.

But if Eliot seems to have held this double-attitude towards politics - this simultaneous opposition to liberalism and totalitarianism - then surely this simply leaves him, and *Murder in the Cathedral*, trapped in an insoluble conflict. In reality it is precisely this conflict, this quandary, which lies at the heart of the play, and, in a different way, at the heart of *The Idea of a Christian Society*. For in the play the whole movement of the action is designed to lead Thomas to face this quandary about his opposition to the king directly. The theme is first touched upon when the First Priest describes Thomas' character in oddly critical terms:

> I know that pride bred of a sudden prosperity
> Was but confirmed by a bitter adversity.
> I saw him as Chancellor, flattered by the King,
> Liked or feared by courtiers, in their overbearing fashion,
> Despised and despising, always isolated,
> Never one among them, always insecure:
> His pride always feeding upon his own virtues,
> Pride drawing sustenance from generosity,
> Loathing power given by temporal devolution,

(43) Ibid., p. 79.

Wishing subjection to God alone. (p. 16)

Here Thomas' rebellion is presented not as a saintly dedication to the Church, but rather as a desire for greater power still. We feel something of this pride when the Second Tempter tries to persuade Thomas to relinquish his obstinate position in exchange for greater earthly power; Thomas replies sharply:

No¡ shall I, who keep the keys
Of heaven and kell, supreme alone in England,
Who bind and loose, with power from the Pope,
Descend to desire a punier power? (p. 31)

But the theme reaches its climax with Thomas' interchange with the Fourth Tempter; first the Tempter offers him a vision of his shrine after his death:

But think, Thomas, think of glory after death.
When king is dead, there's another king,
And one more king is another reign.
King is forgotten, when another shall come:
Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb. (p. 40)

But then, after Thomas confesses that 'I have thought of these things', the Tempter removes the vision by sketching briefly the history of the shrine down to the present day, through its destruction at the hands of Henry VIII, down to the modern, purely historical, interest in Thomas' memory (p.41). Thomas, apparently caught off-guard, cries out:

But what is there to do? what is left to be done?
Is there no enduring crown to be won? (p. 41)

This time the Tempter offers him a vision of his place in heaven, concluding:

> And see far off below you, where the gulf is fixed,
> Your persecutors, in timeless torment,
> Parched passion, beyond expiation. (p. 42)

By referring here to a belief actually current in the early Church, that the Blessed will be able to watch the tortures of the damned from their safe vantage point in heaven, Eliot seems to be reflecting cbliquely his awareness of the Nietszchean critique of Christianity - that its 'slave-morality' is merely the expression of a perverted will to power. In effect this accusation is levelled at Thomas himself, and as Thomas recognises its element of truth, he finds himself trapped in the quandary that his own martyrdom seems to arise from motives as debased as those of his enemies:

> Is there no way, in my soul's sickness,
> Does not lead to damnation in pride?
> I well know that these temptations
> Mean present vanity and future torment.
> Can sinful pride be driven out
> Only by more sinful? Can I neither act nor suffer
> Without perdition? (p. 43)

This quandary, I would suggest, is essentially the same as the more general quandary which we have located in Eliot's attitude to politics as such - if Thomas attempts to assert himself against the King then he seems to merely be reducing the Church to the level of the State, to be politicising his Christianity. If, on the other hand, he simply relinquishes the struggle, then he seems to be denying any connection between his faith and the world at all.

It is at this moment that the Tempter throws back at Thomas, with one minor alteration, the very words which Thomas himself had used concerning the Chorus earlier in the play:

You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer,
You know and do not know, that action is suffering,
And suffering action. Neither does the agent suffer
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
In an eternal action, an eternal patience
To which all must consent that it may be willed
And which all must suffer that they may will it,
That the pattern may subsist, that the wheel may turn and still
Be forever still. (p. 43)

As all critics agree, this speech contains the heart of Eliot's message in the play; unfortunately the critics do not entirely agree as to what that meaning is(44). As a first step to clarifying its meaning, we need to look back to the first time that the words are used in the play, when Thomas first enters the stage and hears the worldly Second Priest scolding the Chorus for wanting Thomas to stay in France rather than come to England and precipitate the tragedy of his death (pp. 21-22). But the precise significance of the key terms in the speech can only be understood fully if we connect them, not with the Choric speech which immediately precedes them, but rather to the claim of the Chorus in their very first speech:

For us the poor there is no action,
But only to wait and witness. (p. 13)

This explicit claim to passivity is indirectly repeated in the later speech:

We do not wish anything to happen.
Seven years we have lived quietly,
Succeeded in avoiding notice,
Living and partly living. (p. 19)

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(44) For representative interpretations see: Grover Smith, op. cit., pp. 187-188; and Kristian Smidt, Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot, London, 1961, p. 198.

Thomas then enters and declares:

> They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer
> They know and do not know, that action is suffering
> And suffering is action. Neither does the agent suffer
> Nor the patient act. (p. 22)

Here 'suffer', then, seems to have a meaning which is closer to its Latin root ('suffere'= to undergo, endure) than to its present primary meaning of 'to experience pain or distress'. (Undoubtedly that meaning is also, to some degree, present, just as here the word 'patient' means primarily 'one who is patient', although it probably also carries something of the meaning of 'a sick person'.) Thomas in effect says that the Chorus' belief that they are merely being subjected to events over which they do not have any influence, is itself based on a false antithesis between 'doers' and 'sufferers'; from one point of view both 'doers' and 'sufferers' choose the events in which they participate simply by accepting them; in another sense, neither are responsible for the events in which they participate. Thus when the Fourth Tempter throws back these words at Thomas he seems to be saying that Thomas himself has now become trapped in that false antithesis, one between passivity - withdrawal from the world - and activity - intervention in the world. But how then is this antithesis false? Here I think we must turn to the *Bhagavad Gita* for help in understanding Eliot's meaning.

Critics have, of course, long been aware of the importance of classical Indian philosophy to Eliot's work, although, as Herbert Howarth has remarked, we still await a definitive study by an appropriately qualified comparativist on this subject(45). Eliot's own knowledge of Indian thought

(45) Herbert Howarth, Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot, London, 1965, p. 201. In general Howarth's work is the best source of information on this

went well beyond that amateur curiosity in Eastern wisdom so prevalent among his contemporaries, for he spent two years of postgraduate study on Indian philology and one year on Indian philosophy, achieving excellent grades(46). Eliot himself remarked later that: 'my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility'(47). There is no space to enter this subject in any depth here, but it is clear that this influence can be seen at various stages of Eliot's work, from the use of the title *The Fire Sermon* for one of the sections of *The Wasteland*, as well as the Sanskrit phrases which appear in the close of that poem, to the references to the lotos and the *Bhagavad Gita*, which occur in the *Four Quartets.* Perhaps more significant than these, in the context of this paper, is Eliot's footnote to a paper delivered at a religious conference in 1941:

> I would not, however, minimize the importance... of the need for a Christian examination and understanding of Eastern thought, which the Christian philosophy of the future cannot afford to neglect.(48)

It is, I believe, in precisely this sense that the *Bhagavad Gita* was important to Eliot - as a contribution to his philosophy of a Christian politics.

While there is no definite evidence that Eliot studied the *Bhagavad Gita* at Harvard, it is clear that he knew the poem from his younger days. Indeed it seems highly likely that as a boy he read Edwin Arnold's well-known Victorian translation of the poem, called *The Song Celestial*, for he certainly recalled later his boyhood delight in Arnold's companion

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subject. Helen Gardner, The Compositios of the Four Quartets, London, 1978, pp. 54-57, gives a useful summary of Eliot's attitudes. Smidt, op. cit., pp. 182-189, is typically penetrating.

(46) Howarth, op. cit., pp. 200-201.

(47) T. S. Eliot, The Unity of European Culture, 1946; quoted, Howarth, op. cit., p. 201.

(48) I. C. S., p. 153, Note 1.

poem on the life of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*[49]. Whether this is so or not, it is certain that in one of the fragments preserved among the drafts of *The Wasteland* he echoed the poem closely, and this fragment was itself probably composed while he was studying Sanskrit[50]. Again, in 1929, in his well-known essay on Dante, Eliot commented that 'the *Bhagavad-Gita* ... is the next greatest philosophical poem to the *Divine Comedy* within my experience'[51] - from Eliot this is high praise indeed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in 1937, when he was writing on the subject of the Spanish Civil War in the *Criterion*, Eliot explicitly connected the *Bhagavad Gita* with the problem of the appropriate attitude to take to contemporary politics:

> That balance of mind which a few highly-civilized individuals, such as Arjuna, the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*, can maintain in action, is difficult for most of us even as observers, and is not encouraged by the greater part of the press.[52]

The *Bhagavad Gita* itself is simply part of the great Indian epic poem known as the *Mahabharata*[53]; the epic itself is about the long war between the Kauravas and their cousins, the Pandavas. At one point in the war the Pandavas send Krishna, who is in fact an incarnation of the god Vishnu, to make peace with the enemy. The offer, however, is rejected, and battle between the sides becomes inevitable. Krishna himself then

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(49) See Smidt, op. cit., p. 144.

(50) See Valerie Eliot (ed.), T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts, London, 1979, p. 111, and Note, p. 130. c. f. Ward, op. cit., p. 74.

(51) See Kermode (ed.), op. cit., p. 222.

(52) The Criterion, 16 (Jan 1937): p. 290.

(53) In what follows I am specially indebted to R. C. Zaehner's well-known study and translation, The Bhagavad-Gita, Oxford, 1969. For convenience I have quoted from: Juan Mascaro (trans), The Bhagavad Gita, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, Midd., 1962.

volunteers to be the charioteer of the youngest of the Pandavas, Arjuna, and it is at this point that the *Bhagavad Gita*, the 'Song of God', begins. But when Arjuna, in the first chapter of the poem, sees his own relatives and teachers in the opposing army, he is 'overcome by grief and despair'(54) and he turns to Krishna and declares: 'shall I kill my own masters who, though greedy of my kingdom, are yet my sacred teachers? I would rather eat in this life the food of a beggar than eat royal food tasting of their blood'(55). At this point Krishna counters by offering Arjuna the traditional Indian wisdom of the eternity of the Spirit and the unreality of this world:

> Thy tears are for those beyond tears; and are thy words words of wisdom? The wise grieve not for those who live; and they grieve not for those who die - for life and death shall pass away. Because we have been for all time; I, and thou, and those kings of men. And we all shall be for all time, we all for ever and ever.(56)

and he goes on to urge Arjuna:

> Think thou also of thy duty and do not waver. There is no greater good for a warrior to fight in a righteous war.(57)

Yet as Krishna goes on to describe to Arjuna the 'path of wisdom of the Sankhyas' an evident contradiction seems to open up in his advice:

> He whose mind is untroubled by sorrows, and for pleasures he has no longings, beyond passion, and fear and anger, he is the sage of unwavering mind.
>
> Who everywhere is free from all ties, who neither rejoices nor sorrows if fortune is good or ill, his is a serene wisdom.

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(54) Mascaro, op. cit., p. 54 (1:28).
(55) Ibid., p. 48 (2:5).
(56) Ibid., p. 49 (2:11, 12).
(57) Ibid., p. 51 (2:31).

> When in recollection he withdraws all his senses from the attractions of the pleasures of the sense, even as a tortoise withdraws all its limbs, then his is a serene wisdom.(58)

Krishna seems both to recommend involvement in the world, fighting, and withdrawal from the world. Unsurprisingly, Arjuna feels confused by this advice, and so the third chapter of the poem opens with his outburst to Krishna:

> If thy thought is that vision is greater than action, why dost thou enjoin upon me the terrible action of war?
>
> My mind is in confusion because in thy words I find contradictions. Tell me in truth therefore by what path may I attain the supreme.(59)

It is precisely this outburst of Arjuna's which we need to compare to Thomas own moment of despair before the Fourth Tempter. For. like Arjuna, Thomas finds himself torn between his duty to act in the world and his recognition of the futility of any such action. Krishna's answer to Arjuna's passionate question is thus of the greatest significance for *Murder in the Cathedral*:

> Not by refraining from action does man attain freedom from action.
>
> Not by mere renunciation does he attain supreme perfection.
>
> For not even a moment can a man be without action. Helplessly all are driven to action by the forces born of Nature.
>
> He who withdraws himself from actions, but ponders on their pleasures in his heart, he is under a delusion and is a false follower of the Path.
>
> But great is the man who, free from attachments, and with a mind ruling its powers in harmony, works on the path of Karma Yoga, the path of consecrated action...
>
> The world is in the bonds of action, unless the action is consecration. Let thy actions then be pure, free from the bonds of desire.(60)

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(58) Ibid., p. 53 (2:56-58).
(59) Ibid., p. 56 (3:1, 2).
(60) Ibid., p. 56 (3:4-7, 9).

In other words Krishna teaches Arjuna that renunciation of action is not so much a matter of what you do as a matter of what your attitude is to what you do. Arjuna must learn at once to perform his duty as a member of the warrior caste and to relinquish his attachment to any particular outcome to his actions, good or bad.

If we apply this to *Murder in the Cathedral* we can see that Thomas, insofar as he regards his martyrdom as simply the path to an even greater kind of power, is precisely parallel to the man 'who withdraws himself from actions, but ponders on their pleasures in his heart'. Thus the essential meaning of the words of the Tempter seems to be that any choice between action and suffering is an illusory choice - what counts is not refraining from action in the world, but rather achieving the right inner attitude to that action. Indeed this is precisely what Thomas himself comes to see:

> Servant of God has chance of greater sin
> And sorrow, than the man who serves a king.
> For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause serve them,
> Still doing right; and striving with political men
> May make that cause political, not by what they do
> But by what they are. (p. 48)

This is indeed the heart of Eliot's political philosophy - what makes a man's political actions Christian or not is not simply the question of his political aims, but rather the spiritual state which he is in when he performs those actions. But for Eliot the achievement of the correct state of mind seems to have demanded the recognition that all action in this world is from a religious perspective profoundly futile - hence the persistent emphasis on fatalism and pessimism in his work. Yet this does not mean that our actions are unimportant, or that we should withdraw from the

world - rather it means that our actions must be judged from an eternal perspective, a perspective from which even the slightest tinge of utilitarianism has been expunged.

Yet while Eliot insists that 'the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of the will of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr' (p. 53), he also wishes to affirm that the purpose of martyrdom is 'to warn men and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways' (p. 53). In other words a man's utter consecration of his actions to the will of God will have a wider effect than merely his own spiritual perfection; this idea is enacted in the play by the relationship between Thomas and the Chorus. When Thomas seems to be threatened by despair the Chorus also feel threatened:

> God gave us always some reason, some hope; but now a new terror has soiled us, which none can avert, none can avoid, flowing under our feet and over the sky;
> Under doors and down chimneys, flowing in at the ear and the mouth and the eye.
> God is leaving us... (p. 46)

and they end their speech with the plea:

> O Themas Archbishop, save us, save us, save yourself that we may be saved;
> Destroy yourself and we are destroyed. (p. 47)

Thomas' personal spiritual struggle in this way becomes identified with the wider spiritual struggle of the community at large - and here we may see the influence of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Coloneus* on the play. Later Thomas comforts the Chorus just before his death:

> This is one moment,
> But know that another

Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy
When the figure of God's purpose is made complete. (p. 74)

This 'moment' seems to come in the final speech of the play, also delivered by the Chorus:

We praise Thee, O God, for Thy glory displayed in all the creatures of the earth,

In the snow, in the rain, in the wind, in the storm; in all of Thy creatures, both the hunters and the hunted.

For all things exist only as seen by Thee, only as known by Thee, all things exist

Only in Thy light, and Thy glory is declared even in that which denies Thee; the darkness declares the glory of light. (p. 92)

Thomas' death, then, however tragic or futile in a worldly sense, is of the deepest significance for the community because it returns meaning to the universe by re-establishing the pattern of Christ's sacrifice.

It is fascinating to observe the way in which essentially the same pattern of ideas is reproduced in Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Indeed the very social structure of the play reappears in Eliot's distinction between three different social group:

The relation of the Christian State, the Christian Community, and the Community of Christians, may be looked at in connexion with the problem of *belief*. Among the men of State, you would have as a minimum, conscious conformity of behaviour. In the Christian Community that they ruled, the Christian faith would be ingrained, but it requires, as a minimum, only a largely unconscious behaviour; and it is only from the much smaller number of conscious human beings, the Community of Christians, that one would expect a conscious Christian life on its highest social level.(61)

In this reproduction of the social structure appropriate to a dramatic re-

(61) I. C. S., p. 57.

presentation of Thomas' medieval world, in a blueprint for the future of British society, Eliot's own elitism and suthoritarianism appear at their most exposed. The Christian Community - 'the great mass of humanity whose attention is occupied mostly by their direct relation to the soil, or the sea, or the machine'[62] - are clearly equivalent to the Chorus of the play, while the Community of Christians - 'the much smaller number of conscious human beings' - corresponds to Thomas himself. Thus Eliot's elitism here must be set against his extraordinarily severe notion of what the Christian life should consist in:

> Even for the most highly-developed and conscious individual, living in the world, a consciously Christian direction of thought and feeling can only occur at particular moments during the day and during the week, and these moments themselves recur in consequence of formed habits.[63]

It is surely these men, men who strive for an utter submission to God's purposes, who bridge the gap, as Thomas does in the play, between the necessary other-worldliness of the Christian, his awareness of the futility of political action, and his necessary involvement in the world, his responsibility to a broader Christian society. It seems to me that this political conception of sainthood as a resolution between ascetic pessimism and political activism, must have first been developed by Eliot as he wrote *Murder in the Cathedral*; in a later piece of writing, however, his fundamental conception is clearly articulated:

> A Christian Britain implies not merely converts, but the conversion of social consciousness. It will appear in the lives of prophets - men who have not merely kept the faith through the dark age, but who have lived through the mind of that dark age, and got beyond it. The Christian prophets are

(62) Ibid., p. 57.
(63) Ibid., p. 59.

> not always recognized in their lives; or they may be stoned, or slain between the temple and the altar: but it is through them that God works to convert the habits of feeling and thinking, of desiring and willing, to which we are all more enslaved than we know.(64)

It is clear by now that this conception of sainthood as a freedom from 'desiring and willing' owes a great deal to Eliot's reading in Indian thought; but it is also clear that if this is politics, it is a very strange and unusual kind of politics, for it is politics by asceticism and self-sacrifice. Indeed, if we accept that this is a kind of politics, it then becomes evident that Eliot's own life and writings were profoundly political acts.

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(64) Ibid., p. 122.